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ABSTRACT

A pilot study was conducted to identify a viable method for analyzing the distinctive characteristics of the English writing of Hispanic students while retaining the consistency of diagnosis of the holistic method. Forty Hispanic students from the eighth and tenth grades were chosen as subjects. Some were fluent in both languages; others were limited in English with strong Spanish skills. A control group of 48 monolingual English speakers at both grade levels was also included. Subjects were asked to write an essay of one to five paragraphs on a choice of four topics. Analysis of the essays was based on two scoring systems: a holistic system which used a 6-point scale, and an itemized or analytic scoring system that was based on a 12-point scale. The itemized system, developed by the researcher, reflected an emphasis on the structure and organization of the essay with points earned or taken away in such areas as introduction, body, conclusion, syntax, devices, format, and fluency. Eighth grade Hispanic students scored an average of 2.45 on the holistic scale, and the English-speaking students scored an average of 4.05. Tenth grade Hispanics averaged 4.15 compared with 4.60 for the control group. Under the itemized scoring system, eighth grade Hispanics averaged 7.9 compared to the control group's 12.96; tenth grade Hispanics averaged 12.15 compared to the control group's 11.25. Although the holistic scoring system did not provide sufficient information for diagnosing writing skills for Hispanics, it did indicate, however, that the itemized scale had validity in terms of consistency while also providing more specific information for the teacher. (Author/DS)

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Writing Level Competencies of Hispanic Students

Natalie A. Kuhlman

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WRITING LEVEL COMPETENCIES OF HISPANIC STUDENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Students who are a part of a bilingual program are assessed for their oral language skills, as part of federal and state mandates. With national focus on the basic skills of all students, the need for assessing writing skills of dual language students has become even more important. What criteria will be used to assess these students, however, is still in question.

The majority of the evaluations, including criteria and objectives that have been developed, are based on the expected proficiencies of monolingual English speaking students, (see e.g. White, 1978). Or, the evaluations are based on ESL program criteria, such as that of controlled compositions. To date, a method to analyze the overall writing skills of students who are from a dual language background has not been established, although some school districts are now attempting this task.

Assessments that do take place usually focus on syntax, (see e.g. Rizzo and Villafane, 1975; Merrill, 1976; Teel, 1971; and Willard, 1971). While this is an important need, in terms of language interference particularly, syntax is only one aspect of a person's writing skills. Other areas include choosing, limiting, developing, organizing, and substantiating a topic.

In addition, discourse concerns such as conjuncts and other cohesive elements influence the effectiveness of the writing. Recent research in this area both for monolingual English speakers (Halliday and Hasan, 1976) and for students learning English as a second language (Johns, 1979) is now becoming available.

In addition, some research is available concerning methods for analyzing writing samples. Holistic writing techniques based on overall impressions have been studied by Powills (1979); Smith (1979); and Steele (1979). These offer fast evaluations and have been shown to be effective diagnostic tools. Other studies have evaluated the use of analytic or itemized scoring techniques (see e.g. Smith, 1979; Humes, 1980). These assessments offer more information about the quality of the writing, while taking longer to evaluate. In addition, these scores may be more subjective and variable in terms of points acquired, since discrete items are given values. In holistic scoring, usually a grosser scale is used, e.g. 1-4 (Powills, 1979), which allows for more inter-rater variability and reliability. However, the itemized method of scoring can provide the flexibility necessary to identify potentially discrete characteristics, for example, of Hispanic writing.

THE PRESENT STUDY

This pilot study focuses on identifying a viable method for analyzing the distinctive characteristics of the English writing of Hispanic students, while retaining the consistency of diagnosis of the holistic method.

Subjects

Hispanics form a large proportion of the population in the Southwest, and a large number of the students in bilingual programs in the schools of the Southwest. For this reason, they have been chosen as the focus of this study, specifically, eighth and tenth grade students. A growing body of research on Hispanic students is becoming available, much of which is devoted to oral language acquisition and assessment (see e.g. Hernandez-Chavez, 1976; Bowen and Ornstein, 1978; and Teschner, 1975). Such research, however, is not equally available on the writing characteristics of these students (see e.g. Merrill, 1976).

Subjects were selected for participation in the study through the Language Assessment Scales, an oral language assessment instrument developed by Ed DeAvila and Sharon Duncan (1976). Subjects scored from limited in English to proficient in English with varying skills in Spanish. Of the 20 eighth graders, eleven were fluent in both languages, and the remaining nine were limited in English, with strong Spanish skills. In addition, a control group of 28 monolingual English speakers at the eighth grade level, and 20 at the tenth grade level were included in the study.

Data Collection

Subjects were asked to write an essay of one to five paragraphs on a choice of four topics: whether or not mothers should work; whether or not smoking should be allowed in public;

good and bad points about the cafeteria; or a problem or conflict recently faced and how it was solved. Baseline data was taken in questionnaire form.

Data Analysis

In the present study, both a holistic scoring system was used, and an itemized or analytic system. The holistic system (SS) was developed by evaluators trained at the Berkeley Writing Project, and is used as exit criteria from Writing Development courses taught in the Study Skills Department at San Diego State University. A six-point scale was used. However, since two evaluators read each essay, a total of 12 points was possible. A score of 8 is acceptable for exit from the Study Skills Department into Freshman English. (See appendix for scoring criteria).

The itemized (I) or analytic scoring system was developed by the present researcher and her associate as part of this pilot study. Seven areas were identified (See appendix): introduction, body, conclusion, syntax, devices, format and fluency. As can be seen, points were given within these categories for various strengths, and some points were taken away for weaknesses. The scoring system reflects an emphasis on the structure and organization of the essay, while not ignoring syntax as a characteristic. (Cohesion, which is not specifically included here, is planned as part of the expanded study). A total of 20 points was possible.

RESULTS

At the eighth grade level, the Hispanic students scored an average of 2.45 on the holistic scale (see Table IV) and the monolingual English speakers had an average of 4.05 (see Table II). Using the same scale, students at the tenth grade showed improvement. The Hispanic students' average was 4.15, while the control group averaged a slightly higher 4.60 (see Table VII). Using the itemized scoring system, eighth grade Hispanic students averaged 7.9, while the control group averaged 12.96 (see Tables I, III). At the tenth grade, however, the Hispanic students had an average score of 12.15, while the control group actually dropped to an average of 11.25 (see Tables VI and VIII).

Since the subjects were not followed from the eighth to tenth grades (planned for a future study), it cannot be claimed that the control group lost ground while the Hispanic group gained. One can state that the scores for the Hispanic tenth graders were significantly higher than for the Hispanic eighth graders (7.9 vs 12.15), and that the tenth grade control group, by comparison, scored slightly lower than their eighth grade counterparts (12.96 vs 11.25). Any number of factors might account for these differences, including the high number of proficient Spanish speakers in the tenth grade. A rough correlation did exist, however, between the improvement in both holistic and itemized scores for the Hispanic students, and the slight differences in scores for the control group.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this pilot study was to develop and test a method for identifying the writing characteristics of Hispanic students in the Southwest. It was found that the holistic scoring used for students in the Study Skills Department at San Diego State University, while providing scores fairly consistent with those found in the pilot scoring, did not provide sufficient information for use in diagnosing writing skills of Hispanics. However, the holistic scores provided some evidence that the itemized scoring had validity in terms of consistency, while also providing more specific information for the teacher. It is the intent of the present researcher to expand this pilot study to a larger population to determine if this method is viable within the context of the classroom teacher.

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TABLE I: ITEMIZED TOTAL FOR 8TH GRADE HISPANIC STUDENTS

No.	I	SS	E/S	No.	I	SS	E/S
1	15.5	4	4/4	11	7.0	2+	4/4
2	12.0	4-	3/3	12	7.0	2+	4/3
3	11.0	3	3/4	13	7.0	3+	3/4
4	10.0	2	3/1	14	6.5	2	5/4
5	9.5	4	4/3	15	6.5	2+	4/2
6	9.5	2	3/1	16	6.0	2	3/3
7	9.0	3+	3/4	17	6.0	2	4/3
8	8.5	2	3/2	18	4.0	2	3/3
9	8.5	2	4/3	19	4.0	2	3/3
10	7.5	2+	4/3	20	3.0	2	4/4

Average score: 7.9

TABLE III: I TOTALS FOR 8TH GRADE CONTROL GROUP

No.	I	SS	M/F	No.	I	SS	M/F
1	17.5	6+	F	16	12.5	5	F
2	17	6	M	17	12.5	4	F
3	17	5	F	18	12	3	F
4	17	4-	F	19	11.5	3	F
5	15.5	6	F	20	11	4	M
6	15.5	4	M	21	11	4	M
7	15.5	5	F	22	10.5	4	M
8	15	5+	M	23	10.5	4	F
9	14.5	3	F	24	10.5	5	M
10	14.5	4	M	25	9.5	2	M
11	14	4	F	26	9.5	2	F
12	13.5	4	F	27	9	4	M
13	13.5	4	M	28	7.5	2	M
14	13	4	F				
15	12.5	3	M				

Average score: 12.96

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TABLE II: SS TOTALS FOR HISPANIC 8TH GRADE STUDENTS

No.	SS	I	E/S	No.	SS	I	E/S
1	4	15.5	4/4	4	2	10.0	3/1
5	4	9.5	4/3	6	2	9.5	3/1
2	4-	12.0	3/3	8	2	8.5	3/2
7	3+	9.0	3/4	9	2	8.5	4/3
13	3+	7.0	3/4	14	2	6.5	5/4
3	3	11.0	3/4	16	2	6.0	3/3
10	2+	7.5	4/3	17	2	6.0	4/3
11	2+	7.0	4/4	18	2	4.0	3/3
12	2+	7.0	4/3	19	2	4.0	3/3
15	2+	6.5	4/2	20	2	3.0	4/4

Average score: 2.45

TABLE IV: SS TOTALS FOR 8TH GRADE CONTROL GROUP

No.	SS	I	M/F	No.	SS	I	M/F
1	6+	17.5	F	17	4	12.5	F
2	6	17	M	20	4	11	M
5	6	15.5	M	21	4	11	M
8	5+	15	M	22	4	10.5	M
3	5	17	F	23	4	10.5	F
7	5	15.5	F	27	4	9	M
16	5	12.5	F	9	3	14.5	F
24	5	10.5	M	15	3	12.5	M
4	4+	17	F	18	3	12	F
6	4	15.5	M	19	3	11.5	F
10	4	14.5	M	25	2	9.5	M
11	4	14	F	26	2	9.5	F
12	4	13.5	F	28	2	7.5	M
13	4	13.5	M				
14	4	13	F				

Average score: 4.03

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TABLE VI: I TOTALS FOR 10TH GRADE HISPANIC STUDENTS

No.	I	SS	E/S	No.	I	SS	E/S
1	16.5	5+	4/4	11	12.5	6-	4/5
2	16.0	5+	3/5	12	12.0	5+	5/5
3	15.5	5	4/4	13	12.0	4-	4/4
4	15.0	6	4/4	14	11.5	3+	3/5
5	14.0	4	3/2	15	10.5	4+	4/4
6	14.0	4+	4/4	16	10.0	4	3/4
7	14.0	5	3/-	17	8.5	3	3/4
8	13.0	4	5/5	18	8.5	3	4/4
9	12.5	5	3/4	19	8.0	3	4/5
10	12.5	3	3/5	20	6.5	2	3/4

Average: 12.15

TABLE VIII: I TOTALS FOR 10TH GRADE CONTROL GROUP

No.	I	SS	No.	SS	I
1	15.5	5+	11	12.5	4+
2	15.0	7+	12	12.0	4-
3	15.0	7-	13	10.5	7
4	14.5	4	14	9.0	3
5	13.5	7	15	8.5	2
6	13.5	5	16	8.5	3+
7	13.0	6	17	7.5	5
8	13.0	5	18	6.5	2
9	12.5	6	19	6.0	3+
10	12.5	5	20	5.5	2

Average: 11.25

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TABLE VII: SS SCORES FOR 10TH GRADE HISPANIC STUDENTS

No.	SS	I	E/S	No.	SS	I	E/S
4	6	15.0	4/4	5	4	14.0	3/2
9	6-	12.5	4/5	8	4	13.0	5/5
2	5+	16.0	3/5	16	4	10.0	3/4
1	5+	16.5	4/4	13	4-	12.0	4/4
12	5+	12.0	5/5	14	3+	11.5	3/5
3	5	15.5	4/4	11	3	12.5	3/5
10	5	12.5	3/4	17	3	8.5	3/4
7	5	14.0	3/-	19	3	8.0	4/5
6	4+	14.0	4/4	18	3	8.5	4/4
15	4+	10.5	4/4	20	2	6.5	3/4

Average: 4.15

TABLE IX: SS TOTALS FOR 10TH GRADE CONTROL GROUP

No.	SS	I	No.	SS	I
2	7+	15.0	17	5	7.5
5	7	13.5	11	4	12.5
13	7	10.5	4	4	14.5
3	7-	15.0	12	4-	12.0
7	6	13.0	19	3+	6.0
9	6	12.5	16	3+	8.5
1	5+	15.5	14	3	9.0
6	5	13.5	15	2	8.5
8	5	13.0	18	2	6.5
10	5	12.5	20	2	5.5

Average: 4.60